

Office of the Governor

NEWS RELEASE

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Governor Announces Partnership to Boost Infant Immunizations

TRENTON -- Gov. Christie Whitman and Hallmark Cards, Inc. today announced they are teaming up with state hospitals and Mercer County Arc to urge parents of newborns to immunize their children during the first two years of life.

Starting in May, Gov. Whitman and her husband, John, will begin sending congratulatory cards to new parents reminding them of the importance of immunizing their babies against 10 once common, still dangerous childhood diseases. The cards, specially designed for this public awareness campaign and donated by Hallmark Cards, Inc., include a detachable, pocket-size immunization record parents can take with them on well-baby visits to their family doctor or clinic.

"Vaccinations can make a world of difference in a child's life. Yet, regrettably, too many 2-year-old children in New Jersey still lack one or more of the recommended vaccines," Whitman said. "These cards will remind parents that immunizations and well-baby care go hand in hand."

Whitman said the cards will be sent to parents of newborns using information collected at hospitals through the state's electronic birth certificate program. St. Francis Medical Center, site of today's announcement, and 70 other hospitals and birthing centers have the electronic birth certificate system, which allows for faster, more accurate data collection and monitoring of child health. Adults with mental disabilities working with Mercer County Arc will then label each card before mailing.

"This unique public-private partnership revitalizes our existing information network, helps get the message out more effectively, and enables us to try new ways of reaching parents with the message that they shouldn't wait to vaccinate," Whitman said.

Safe, effective and affordable vaccines are available at doctors' offices, clinics and through local health departments to prevent diphtheria, tetanus (lock jaw), pertussis (whooping cough), measles, rubella (German measles), mumps, polio, bacterial meningitis, hepatitis b, and varicella (chickenpox).

While immunization schedules call for children to receive 80 percent of these vaccinations before their second birthdays, Health and Senior Services Commissioner Len Fishman said too many parents are waiting until their children are about to enter day care or school before getting them fully immunized.

"While nearly all school-aged children are up-to-date with their vaccinations, as many as 26,000 2-year-olds don't have all the shots they need. This lapse in protection is a major public health concern and we're grateful to Hallmark, the state's hospitals and Mercer County Arc for their support in promoting infant immunization," said Fishman.

Fishman noted that in 1992, the statewide immunization rate for 2-year-olds was only 50 percent. In 1997, it is 78 percent, which is also the national average.

"Education and motivation are the outstanding qualities of this card," said Karen W. Bartz, community development manager of Hallmark Cards, Inc. and vice president of the Hallmark Corporate Foundation in Kansas City. "The card appeals to the emotions of new parents like nothing else. When the governor and her husband - parents themselves - are making this simple request of them to protect the health of their newborn, parents respond."

Fishman said the Hallmark card project joins other public-private partnerships his department is involved with to improve the state's childhood immunization rates. State Rotary Clubs have teamed up this year with Shop-Rite Food Stores to design and display promotional posters on immunizations in supermarkets in New Jersey and four other states. For the second consecutive year, McDonald's restaurants in North and Central New Jersey are displaying posters and providing tray liners and immunization informational materials to their customers.

"We welcome the commitment these organization have made in joining with us to protect our state's children against vaccine-preventable diseases," Fishman said.

To find out where to get low-cost or free vaccines for your children, New Jersey residents can call 1-800-328-3838.
